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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CONAKRY 000124

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TREASURY FOR OFFICE OF AFRICAN NATIONS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [GV](#)
SUBJECT: FIRST LADY HENRIETTE CONTE PLAYING MATERNAL
PEACEMAKER

REF: CONAKRY 118

Classified By: DCM Julie Winn, Reason 1.4(b, d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) First Lady Henriette Conte says that her husband will follow through on his agreement to the deal struck between the unions, government and Patronat January 27. In a February 1 meeting with DCM, however, she left hanging the question of when he might appoint a prime minister. Madame Conte sees herself as a key mediator and has negotiated not only with the unions but with her husband to ease tensions. Her understanding of events on the ground, however, is colored by her loyalty to the regime and her own isolation from life outside the gates of the military camp she lives in. End Summary.

¶2. (C) DCM met afternoon of February 1, at her own request, with Guinean First Lady Henriette Conte. Madame Conte was quick to respond to the request for an appointment; her staff called back to confirm a meeting within minutes of the initial contact January 31. Madame Conte received DCM at her residence on the grounds of Camp Almamy Samory Toure, the military base in downtown Conakry. Greeting DCM with an embrace, she replied in kind to DCM's New Year's greetings while her photographers took pictures. She then dismissed them and her protocol staff. Participants in the meeting were herself, DCM and former Guinean Ambassador to the UN Camara Mahawa Bangoura.

¶3. (C) DCM noted that she had hoped to present New Year's wishes earlier in the month but events had intervened. She congratulated Madame Conte on the facilitative role she had played in encouraging dialogue since shortly after the strike began, and on her contribution to the parties reaching an accord over the weekend. DCM welcomed the signature January 31 by President Conte of the decree establishing the position and duties of prime minister and head of government (reftel). Madame Conte was appreciative, noting that she felt it was her role as a woman and wife to try to calm tensions "with God's help." She hoped that she had U.S. support, to which DCM responded that Guinea does have our support as it builds its future. DCM stressed Guinea's traditional values of harmony, tolerance and stability. Moreover, it was striking that all participants in the negotiations, including unions, the government, civil society and the First Lady herself, had approached their talks with seriousness and patriotism.

¶4. (C) Madame Bangoura suggested that not every foreign

nation understands or is as helpful to Guinea as the U.S. is.

She observed that Guinea, unlike other countries in the region, is ethnically intermarried, a large family that must remain united. While resisting unwarranted interference in its affairs, she said, Guinea counts not only on U.S. support but on its counsel. Guinea has been the glue that holds the subregion together, she said, but now it needs help too.

15. (C) DCM urged that the tripartite accords signed January 27 provided a roadmap forward, and that U.S. counsel was to finish fulfilling the terms of the agreement, i.e., name a prime minister. Madame Conte said that her husband would certainly follow through on the agreement he had made. That said, Bangoura added, a candidate of broad consensus was critical, and identifying the right person could not be accomplished very quickly. We in the U.S. did not appoint our high government officials in a heartbeat, she said.

16. (C) DCM repeated that appointment of a prime minister was key. She concurred that broad acceptance was needed on a prime ministerial candidate given the magnitude of the challenges Guinea faces. For example, although Guinea has natural riches, corruption and a lack of capacity to ensure good governance have hampered the country's progress. Any prime minister would need a solid team and public support to meet his responsibilities, she concluded.

17. (C) Turning to her talks with union leaders, the First Lady admitted she had been surprised by some of the things she had learned, but declined to expand. She said, however, that she believed that the unions were in good faith, and that the street and its "thugs" had overwhelmed their ability to control events. For example, the workers stayed home during the strike, as they should. It was only hooligans who

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went out. DCM demurred, stating that while there were certainly hooligans out causing damage on several days, the march on January 22 had been comprised of thousands of ordinary citizens, whom she had seen personally. Madame Bangoura hastened to say that yes, there were some ordinary citizens, but they had been coopted by opposition political parties. Madame Conte agreed, adding that the march had not included actual workers.

COMMENT

18. (C) Henriette Conte is quiet and somewhat inarticulate. We believe that she sees herself primarily as the "mother of the country," striving to keep the family together and on peaceable terms. To this end, she has negotiated not only with the unions, but with her husband, seeking common ground and to keep the dialogue open and going forward. That said, she remains isolated from practical reality outside the gates of Camp Samory Toure, and does not appear to understand how roused the Guinean population is.
MCDONALD